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The Tourism Connection: Contributing to Sustainable Community Development in the 21st Century

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Tourism is the number one industry in many countries and the fastest growing economic sector in terms of foreign exchange earnings and job creation. Tourism is one of the world's most important sources of employment, stimulates enormous investment in infrastructure—most of which helps improve the living conditions of local people—and provides governments with substantial tax revenues that fund services for both visitors and residents. In addition, intercultural awareness and personal friendships fostered through tourism are powerful forces for improving international understanding and contributing to peace among all the nations of the world.

The World Tourism Organization defines tourism as the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business, and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited. Tourism, as a development industry, relies on the development and utilization of natural, historical, cultural, and human resources in the local environment as tourist attractions and destinations. Tourism creates recreational uses for natural and human-made amenity resources and converts these into income producing assets. As such, there is great interest in tourism development to help diversify and stabilize rural economies.

Travel and tourism combine segments from other industries that provide goods and services demanded

while traveling away from home, such as transportation, food and beverage, lodging, and amusement and recreation. Effects of tourism are also felt in manufacturing, construction, real estate, government, public utilities, agriculture, and other services.

Emerging Tourism Trends

There are a number of continuing and emerging tourism trends that are important to understand. One is the evolution of the importance of experience. Our society has basically transitioned to an experience-based economy, as today's travelers are seeking new and unique "self-fulfilling" experiences. Traditional tourism activities are being augmented by adventure travel, recreation transportation (bikes, OHVs, snowmobiles, watercraft), nature tourism and eco-tourism, wildlife viewing and birdwatching, agricultural tourism, and cultural heritage tourism.



Great Salt Lake From Antelope Island State Park, Utah

The trend of our changing societal values with respect to the development and use of our natural resources is also emerging. More and more emphasis is being placed on the value of amenity resources for such things as scenery and aesthetics, opportunities for a diversity of recreation experiences, and ecological services for clean air and water, providing habitat for wildlife, and preserving biological diversity.

Another trend involves tourism and our public lands, a powerful combination, as in Leisure Travel and America’s Great Outdoors! Public lands will continue to increase in importance as a primary destination for a growing number of outdoor recreation activities and tourism businesses centered on highly scenic landscapes and natural resources.

Many rural communities have attractive amenity resources, and opportunities exist for the development of a variety of tourism-related businesses that can enhance “Destination Tourism.” Today’s tourists are willing to pay for quality experiences, services, and products, but there must be enough activities and places to visit. The challenge is to focus on development of compatible, dispersed tourist businesses that will help vitalize a local economy, and to develop a quality package of activities and experiences to both attract visitors and convince them to make an extended trip. Natural allies for such tourism development are outdoor recreation, nature tourism, agricultural tourism, and cultural-heritage tourism.



Wildlife and Birdwatching

There has been a steady public interest in the use of our public lands and natural resources for outdoor recreation and nature tourism. Outdoor recreation remains among the top purposes for leisure travel in the U.S. (Figure 1) and almost 80 percent of tourists say scenery is one of their top considerations in selecting a destination for travel. More than three out of four Americans participate in active outdoor recreation each year and in the process spend money, create jobs, and support local communities when they participate in outdoor recreation activities. Simple, healthy, outdoor activities, such as hiking, biking, camping, or wildlife viewing, generate enormous economic power and fuel a far-reaching “ripple effect” that touches many of the nation’s major economic sectors (Source: The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy, Outdoor Industry Foundation, Fall 2006).



**Source: *The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy*
Outdoor Industry Foundation, Fall 2006**

Figure 1

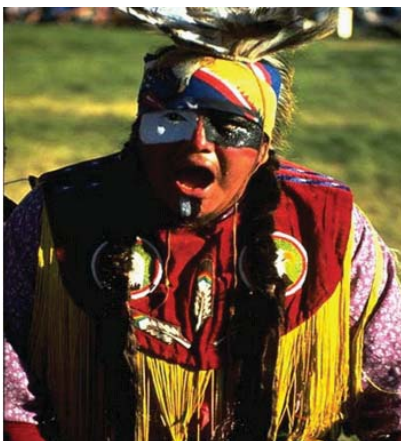
Nature tourism is often considered as one component of outdoor recreation. Nature tourism, also referred to as eco-tourism, is discretionary travel to natural areas that conserve environmental, social, and cultural values, while generating an economic benefit to the local community. Nature tourists spend time and money to experience nature and the outdoors, and learn more about a particular destination with a concern for minimum impact and sustainability.

There has been an increasing interest in experiencing the activities of the farm or ranch for agricultural tourism, or agritourism, defined as the act of visiting a working farm or ranch or any agricultural operation or business for the purposes of enjoyment, education, and active involvement in a variety of activities and experiences. Agritourism is a commercial enterprise not necessarily part of traditional farming/ranching activities, which generates supplemental income for owner-operators through such endeavors as the accommodation of tourists, through heritage and cultural programs, by offering hunting and fishing leases, and through horse packing or other guided trips (Agri-Business Council of Oregon, 2003).

There has also been a growing interest in our significant cultural and historic resources for cultural heritage tourism, defined as discretionary travel to areas rich in significant cultural and heritage resources worthy of preservation. Cultural heritage tourism conserves local social and cultural values, while generating an economic benefit to the local community.

Sustainable Tourism

Additionally, it is important to consider tourism development in a sustainable manner, with approaches that are environmentally sound, economically viable, and



Cultural Heritage Tourism

socially responsible and acceptable. When utilizing tourism for community development, it is important to weigh benefits and costs—to determine what benefits and costs will be for a community and whether the associated costs are acceptable. Ideally, costs can be minimized while maximizing benefits. Tourism development always brings change to a community, and there are potential negative social and environmental impacts. Consequently, because of tourism development's potentially exploitative tendency, such development is being approached with a sense of caution. The critical challenge is to not degrade environmental resources or negatively exploit local human and cultural resources, in order that these resources may be maintained for present and future generations.

What is sustainable tourism? First, do no harm! This is basic to good destination stewardship. Sustainable tourism does not abuse its product—the destination. It seeks to avoid “loved to death” syndrome. Community stakeholders anticipate development pressures and apply management techniques that sustain natural habitats, heritage sites, scenic appeal, and local culture. Sustainable tourism respects local culture, heritage, and traditions. It informs both visitors and hosts, can create community pride, and enhances the visitor experience. It can benefit residents economically through spending, jobs and incomes, tax revenues, and becomes an incentive for wise destination stewardship, supporting integrity of place, preserving the character of the locale, and raising local perceived value of assets.

In addition, sustainable tourism aims for quality, not quantity. It is measured not by sheer numbers of visitors, but rather by their length of stay at destination, the distribution of their spending in a community, and the quality of their visitor experience. Sustainable tourism builds on “sense of place,” emphasizing the distinctiveness of locale and benefitting both visitors and residents alike. Sustainable tourism conserves resources, and environmentally-aware travelers favor businesses that minimize their impact through pollution abatement and control, waste reduction and recycling, energy and water conservation, less use of landscaping and other chemicals, and non-excessive nighttime lighting.

Sustainable tourism is synergistic. All the elements of the environment and socio-cultural setting together

create the tourist experience, and thus it is richer than the sum of its parts and is appealing to visitors with diverse interests. It involves community, businesses, civic groups, and residents, promoting and providing a distinctive, authentic experience for visitors.

The best chances for success in sustainable tourism development efforts come from professionals and volunteers working in tourism development following an approach that focuses on the principles of sustainable development in all development efforts and initiatives. Especially important is the facilitation of resident involvement, participation in decision-making, and local control in development.

Some Principles of Sustainable Tourism Development:

- Follows ethical principles;
- Involves the local population and gives residents an element of control;
- Is undertaken with equity in mind;
- Is low in impact, small in scale, and careful in progress;
- Is appropriate and sensitive to the local natural and socio-cultural environment; and
- Is readily integrated into the existing social and economic life of the community.

Conclusion

Tourism and Outdoor Recreation can be important components of community development, as a part of the economic mix. The community and economic development challenge for many rural communities involves achieving a balance with small business development, manufacturing, farming and ranching, mining and energy development, and tourism and outdoor recreation, with a focus on the sustainable development and use of our natural and socio-cultural resources.

Author's Picks for Further Reading

Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities (1997). By Jim Howe, Ed McMahon, and Luther Probst. Island Press, Washington, D.C.

Your Town—A Destination: The 25 Immutable Rules of Successful Tourism (2007, 2nd ed.). By Roger

Brooks and Maury Forman.

The New Agritourism: Hosting Community and Tourists on your Farm (2008). By Barbara Berst Adams. New World Publishing, Auburn, CA.

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<http://extension.usu.edu/iort/htm/resources>

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